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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000679

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/17/2019

TAGS: PREL PGOV LE IR

SUBJECT: LEBANON: NASRALLAH CRITIQUES LEBANESE ELECTIONS,  
LASHES OUT AT THE PATRIARCH

REF: BEIRUT 668

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4  
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

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¶1. (C) Hizballah SYG Hassan Nasrallah gave a lengthy speech the evening of June 17 in which he critiqued Lebanon's June 7 parliamentary elections. While Nasrallah accepted the defeat of the Hizballah-led opposition, he claimed the opposition had maintained the largest share of popular, moral and constitutional support. His criticism of Maronite Patriarch Nasrallah Sfeir's statements provoked strong defense of the Patriarch by Lebanese Christians and others. Nasrallah committed Hizballah to preserving its political alliances and supporting Nabih Berri as Speaker of Parliament in the next government. He declared that Hizballah participation in the new cabinet would depend on what was offered.

¶2. (C) In his only reference in the speech to Iran's disputed presidential election, Nasrallah asserted that Iran would "overcome" its current trials. Lebanese reactions to the Iranian election have been mixed, with President Michel Sleiman and Prime Minister Fouad Siniora congratulating President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad for his reelection. Meanwhile, other Lebanese politicians and citizens remain focused on Iranian citizens' right to demonstrate peacefully. Internet postings indicate Lebanese citizens are skeptical that Hizballah's relationship with Iran would be harmed in any way. The British Ambassador to Lebanon met Hizballah MP Mohammad Raad for the first time June 18. Nasrallah also met March 14 Druze leader Walid Jumblatt the same day. End summary.

NASRALLAH ASSESSES  
LEBANON'S ELECTIONS

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¶3. (SBU) Hizballah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah critiqued the June 7 Lebanese parliamentary elections in a

two-hour speech delivered on June 17. Nasrallah accepted the opposition's defeat in the elections, but asserted that the opposition maintains the largest share of popular, moral, and constitutional support compared to the majority March 14 coalition. He accused March 14 of undermining core religious beliefs held by Shia Muslims -- namely the concept of "wilayat al faqih" -- while, at the same time, lashed out at Maronite Patriarch Nasrallah Sfeir's public statements one day before the elections, in which Sfeir warned of threats to Lebanese identity if the Hizballah-led opposition had won.

¶4. (SBU) Nasrallah concluded his speech by outlining Hizballah's next steps, including: preserving its political alliances; supporting Nabih Berri to continue in the next government as Speaker of Parliament; stating that Hizballah's participation in the next cabinet would depend on what was offered; holding March 14 accountable for its campaign promises; and encouraging the GOL to issue an official statement to counter Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's June 14 speech.

¶5. (SBU) (Note: The Council of Ministers -- the cabinet -- in its last session on June 18 endorsed President Sleiman's June 15 statement, declaring that confronting Israel requires greater Arab unity. The cabinet statement called on the United States and Europe to exert greater pressure on Israel "to accept fair peace initiatives." The statement called for preserving the "spirit of the resistance" to face Israeli threats. It rejected naturalization of Palestinians in Lebanon and emphasized the Palestinians' right of return to their homeland. The statement also asserted that the Arab

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Peace Initiative provided the best opportunity to achieve a comprehensive and fair peace. End note.)

LEBANESE REACTION  
TO THE SPEECH

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¶6. (SBU) Nasrallah's criticism of Patriarch Sfeir provoked considerable reaction from the Lebanese. Several March 14 Christian politicians -- including Amine Gemayel, MP Dory Chamoun, and MP Boutros Harb -- defended Sfeir as a respected religious leader and political moderator. Gemayel called Sfeir "the conscience of Lebanon." Harb accused Nasrallah of attempting to silence the Patriarch's political views. March 14 SYG Fares Souaid criticized Nasrallah's comments as not supporting Islamic-Christian partnership, while Sunni MP Ammar Houri called for respecting all religious figures in Lebanon.

¶7. (C) Opposition-aligned Christian MP-elect Alain Aoun told us he "was not surprised" by Nasrallah's position against the Patriarch, but did not believe that Nasrallah's remarks had damaged Hizballah's relationship with its Maronite Christian ally, Michel Aoun. Anti-Hizballah Shia politician Riad al Assaad believed Nasrallah had lashed out at the Patriarch because Hizballah's main objective at present is to do "anything possible" to support Michel Aoun.

IRANIAN ELECTIONS

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¶8. (C) Although Nasrallah's speech focused heavily on the Lebanese elections, he did make one pointed reference to Iran's June 12 disputed presidential election. Nasrallah warned the March 14 coalition to refrain from commenting on the Iranian vote and predicted the Iranian leadership would overcome its current trials. Late in the speech, Nasrallah promoted Iran as an "Islamic" state (rather than a "Persian" state), loyal to the teachings of the "Arab Prophet Mohammad." Riad al Assaad commented that he believed Hizballah was "accepting" of the Iranian elections, but was generally, nervous about regional developments that could marginalize the group. Hizballah, he said, perceives itself

as a regional power player rather than as a Lebanese entity.

¶9. (SBU) The March 14 Secretariat, on the other hand, "applauded the bravery of the Iranian people in its attachment to freedom, reform and openness" in a statement issued June 17. March 14's statement also expressed hope for stability in Iran by means of moderation, instead of "extremist policies" and Iranian interference in Lebanese and Arab domestic affairs. Although March 14 MP Boutros Harb supported the secretariat's statement and demonstrations for freedom by the Iranian people, he told us he remained cautious about the outcome of Iran's political developments. Meanwhile, President Michel Sleiman and Prime Minister Fouad Siniora telephoned to congratulate Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad on his reelection on June 15.

¶10. (SBU) A review of Lebanese internet blogs and the English-language "NOW Lebanon" website which have solicited Lebanese opinions about the Iranian elections reveal general support for the Iranian people and their right to question the election results. However, in a Lebanese-centric way, the internet postings show a cynicism about possible changes to Hizballah's relationship with Iran as a result of the elections; Hizballah is believed to have the full support of Iran's religious leadership, irrespective of who will be declared president.

BRITISH AMBASSADOR MEETS HIZBALLAH MP;  
WALID JUMBLATT MEETS NASRALLAH

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¶11. (C/NF) In a related development, British Ambassador to Lebanon Frances Guy met with MP Mohammad Raad, leader of Hizballah's parliamentary bloc, on June 18 at Raad's office in parliament. (Note: Details of the meeting to come septel.)

End note.) The British DCM told us that, following the British government's decision some months ago that its Ambassador should meet with Hizballah, plans to arrange a meeting became "bogged" down by Hizballah's insistence that the meeting should receive heavy media coverage. For their part, the British insisted on minimal media coverage, at least until after the Lebanon's June 7 parliamentary elections. The two sides also disagreed on who the U.K. Ambassador should meet with: Hizballah pushed a meeting with a member of the party's external relations branch, while the British preferred to meet with an elected official, such as Raad. With no progress on resolving those issues, the British temporarily aborted their attempts to schedule a meeting, until London gave the green light to try again after the elections. When they approached Raad directly about a meeting with minimal media coverage, he agreed, the British DCM reported.

¶12. (C) Later in the evening of June 18, March 14 Druze leader Walid Jumblatt held a three-hour meeting with Nasrallah. Jumblatt advisor MP Wael Abu Faour told us that the purpose of the meeting was to "relieve" Druze-Shia tensions. (Note: March 14 majority leader Saad Hariri last met Nasrallah in October 2008 with similar explanations. End note.) Jumblatt and Nasrallah agreed that any future disputes would be solved through the state, and that in the event of future clashes, the two leaders would work together to resolve issues, Abu Faour said. He added that Jumblatt and Nasrallah did not discuss cabinet formation, but instead talked about regional developments, including the "Israeli threat." Asked whether Hizballah's weapons were discussed, Abu Faour responded that the weapons were discussed only in a "strategic context.". (Note: We will follow up with Jumblatt next week. End note.)

SISON